

1963 Nuclear Strategy Revisited

Alain C. Enthoven

This paper is a response to an invitation to review an article on U.S. defense policy, particularly nuclear strategy, that I wrote in early 1963 and to reflect on how its main principles have fared in the subsequent twelve years.

It would be an understatement to say that much has happened in the field of defense policy since that time. The article does, to some extent, reflect the particular controversies of the time. There have proved to be important omissions; for example, there was no discussion of mutual restraint in force levels, as opposed to mutual restraint in the use of force. And the focus was on the nuclear confrontation with the U.S.S.R. and the defense of Europe; it ignored Vietnam.

But the main themes have stood up very well. These were the emphasis on the controlled and limited use of force, the necessity of conventional forces equal in strength to those of our opponents, the feasibility of adequate conventional forces, the necessity of invulnerable nuclear forces and command and control systems, and the limited role of nuclear weapons. Of course, I was not the author of these principles. Their development was shared by President John F. Kennedy and his principal White House advisors—Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Charles Hitch, William Kaufmann, John McNaughton, Paul Nitze, Henry Rowen, Maxwell Taylor, Albert Wohlstetter, and others. It is my hope

Dr. Enthoven is Marriner S. Eccles Professor of Public and Private Management, Graduate School of Business, Stanford University. He was formerly Assistant Secretary of Defense for Systems Analysis. The earlier article to which Dr. Enthoven refers, "Reason, Morality, and Defense Policy," is reprinted as Appendix D of this volume. Based on an address, "U.S. Defense Policy for the 1960's," before the Loyola University Forum for National Affairs, Chicago, February 10, 1963, it originally appeared in *America* 108 (April 6, 1963 and April 13, 1963): 461-65, and was reprinted in a number of anthologies.

that a brief review of the background and development of some of these principles will be useful to students of defense policy who have entered the field more recently.

THE STRATEGY OF THE 1950s

In the 1950s the United States' policy for the defense of Europe was based on the belief that NATO land and air forces were hopelessly outnumbered by the forces of the Warsaw Pact countries. Therefore, an effective nonnuclear defense was thought to be impossible. Some thought the imbalance could be offset to some extent by NATO's use of tactical or battlefield nuclear weapons. Many weapons were deployed. But no plan for their use was developed, other than as part of a general nuclear war. There was no concept of limited war with the U.S.S.R.; the design of our military response to Soviet aggression was "all or none." The main purpose of U.S. forces in Europe was to demonstrate our commitment and to serve as a "trip wire" so that a Soviet attack (presumably unlimited) would unleash a total response by the Strategic Air Command (SAC). In the first part of the 1950s the United States had a near monopoly of long-range nuclear striking power, so that SAC could destroy the military forces and industry of the U.S.S.R. without the United States being destroyed in retaliation. But by the end of the decade, the U.S.S.R. had substantial retaliatory power.

U.S. strategic airpower was mostly long-range bombers, based soft and concentrated on about sixty bases. This force was to become dangerously vulnerable as the Soviet missile force grew. But for several years this vulnerability was not perceived as a serious problem by U.S. military leaders because the main scenario in terms of which they thought was a Soviet attack on Europe followed by a U.S. strategic response. At the start of the war, all available forces would have to be launched because of the vulnerability of forces on both sides. There was no built-in capability for control or restraint.

KENNEDY AND McNAMARA, 1961

President Kennedy and Secretary McNamara saw very clearly that nuclear weapons were not a substitute for conventional forces. Nuclear weapons were too dangerous and destructive to be used in any but the most desperate circumstances. The threat to use them was not an effective way to counter Soviet threats (for

example, threats to deny our ^{NO} access to Berlin). Therefore, NATO must have conventional forces equal to those of the other side, and the United States must limit the role of nuclear weapons in its overall strategy to that of retaliation for a nuclear attack on it or its allies. Because of political sensitivities in this country and Europe, and because our conventional forces were inadequate, we had to be very careful how we said this. But the goal was that "our forces will be adequate if we can never be forced because of weakness to be the first to have to resort to nuclear weapons."

This did not eliminate the moral dilemmas of nuclear strategy. Kennedy, McNamara, and their associates recognized that, even in retaliation, it would be wrong to attack cities and kill millions of innocent civilians. Yet if we did not have a capability to retaliate, and plans to use it, the United States and its allies would be at the mercy of the U.S.S.R. Our response was a policy designed to make the ultimate catastrophe as unlikely as possible by restricting to a minimum our dependence on nuclear weapons. We could do that by having adequate conventional forces (so that we would not have to be the first to use nuclear weapons) and by making our nuclear retaliatory force invulnerable (so that the U.S.S.R. would have no incentive to attack with nuclear weapons). Moreover, we went on to design our strategic retaliatory posture so that it could be used with deliberation and control. Thus, for example, Kennedy and McNamara favored the Polaris submarine-launched missile system even though it had no powerful military lobby behind it. And they phased out the B-47, stopped procurement of B-52s, and arrested development of the B-70, all against the forceful opposition of an extremely powerful military lobby. Their reasoning was that, in the event of a nuclear attack, the Polaris missiles could be safely withheld at sea, for weeks if necessary, while the president assessed the situation and attempted to negotiate a cease-fire; bombers, on the other hand, would have to be launched on warning before their extremely vulnerable bases could be destroyed, and if those bases were destroyed, they would have to be committed to an attack in the first hours of war, or lost. Kennedy and McNamara also directed the deployment of survivable command and control systems, such as airborne command posts. And they directed the development of war plans that would give the president the flexibility to limit his retaliatory attack to the enemy's strategic bases, or to those plus other military targets, avoiding attacks on cities. (However, the radioactive fallout from such attacks would have killed millions.)

THE ROAD TO AND FROM ANN ARBOR

When John Kennedy became president, the link between any armed combat with the U.S.S.R. and unlimited nuclear war seemed perilously close. Therefore he and his associates wanted to build many "firebreaks" between any local conflict and the nuclear destruction of our societies. It was in this spirit that McNamara sought to establish the "no [attacks on] cities" doctrine. In his famous commencement address at Ann Arbor, in June 1962, he said:

The U.S. has come to the conclusion that to the extent feasible, basic military strategy in a possible general nuclear war should be approached in much the same way that more conventional military operations have been regarded in the past. That is to say, principal military objectives, in the event of a nuclear war stemming from a major attack on the Alliance, should be the destruction of his military forces, not of his civilian population.¹

It has often been noted that McNamara subsequently backed away from this idea, and I have frequently been asked why. I can offer only my personal interpretation. First, while the Ann Arbor address elicited some thoughtful comment, it also elicited some confused emotional responses. One powerful member of the Senate Armed Services Committee sharply criticized McNamara for showing a lack of resolve. Some thought that weakening the certainty of destruction of Soviet cities would make a nuclear attack on the United States more attractive to the U.S.S.R.—despite our overwhelming nuclear superiority. And it did not appear that there was any useful purpose to be served by arguing the point. Second, the goal of destroying enough of the Soviet strategic forces to make an appreciable difference in the number of Americans surviving a Soviet retaliatory attack generated an open-ended requirement for more strategic weapons. The controversy over the RS-70—a bomber with an alleged capability to reconnoiter the U.S.S.R. and attack surviving missile sites—was particularly intense in the year following June 1962, and the Ann Arbor speech was used in an attempt to give the program a sensible strategic rationale. Third, as one looked ahead to the late 1960s, it became apparent that with the deployment of a large Soviet missile submarine fleet, no amount of U.S. offensive power could destroy enough of the Soviet forces to make an appreciable differ-

ence. So procurement of a capability to attack Soviet land-based forces did not appear to enhance our security in any important way.

But the most important reason for abandoning the Ann Arbor theme was that it was confusing the far more important message that *nobody wins a nuclear war*. There was still a great deal of controversy over that, in the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill. For example, General Curtis LeMay was fighting a very effective campaign for the idea that the United States should buy a capability to fight and win a nuclear war with the U.S.S.R. rather than spending the money on an apparently hopelessly expensive build-up of conventional forces. (Recall that in the mid-1960s, it was still widely believed that NATO forces were hopelessly outnumbered on the ground.) Most people in the Pentagon and on the Armed Services Committees, if not the Congress generally (not to mention NATO capitals), still did not understand that the threat to resort to nuclear war was no longer a usable instrument of policy. Technology and forces were changing much more rapidly than the general understanding of their implications. As a practical matter, it was impossible to communicate a clear distinction between McNamara's view of deliberation, control, and "no cities" as a last desperate hope to make the best of a catastrophe, and General LeMay's view that we could fight and win a nuclear war—if only we would buy RS-70s and the like instead of conventional forces. The Ann Arbor theme was too subtle an idea to be effective in the political arena.

THE 1963-1968 STRATEGIC POLICY

Strategic-weapons policy must evolve as forces and technology evolve. Over the next five years, the following ideas became the main principles of U.S. policy:

First, the size and composition of our strategic retaliatory forces would be determined by the "assured destruction mission." Under this policy, we would buy amounts and kinds of forces sufficient to be sure, even under very pessimistic assumptions, that they could survive a deliberate Soviet attack well enough to strike back and destroy 20 to 25 percent of their population. This was a criterion for adequacy of our deterrent; it was not a declaration of how the forces would actually be used in case of war. Since the amount of forces we needed to achieve the assured

destruction mission were not very sensitive to the size of the Soviet offensive forces, this policy appeared to put a ceiling on U.S. offensive force requirements.

Second, given the force size determined by the assured destruction criterion, we would enhance their damage limiting (countermilitary) capabilities where this could be done at a low cost. We recognized that it was no longer possible to achieve a first-strike, offensive capability sufficient to destroy enough of the Soviet forces so that our society could not be destroyed in retaliation. Nevertheless, some countermilitary capability appeared useful for two reasons. If we were attacked, it might serve some useful (for example, damage-limiting) purpose to be able to destroy residual Soviet forces. This would be a matter of making the best of a catastrophe, not making the threatened use of nuclear weapons a usable instrument of policy. Additionally, there was the important factor of virtual attrition. In other words, well over half the United States' expenditures for strategic offensive forces were (and still are) for the protection of our forces from a Soviet attack. We could buy many more missiles within the same budget if we did not have to spend so much on silos and submarines. And we chose the Minuteman ICBM with its low payload (compared to that of the large Soviet ICBM) because it was easier to protect. But if our forces had no countermilitary capability, it would be much cheaper and easier for the Soviets to protect their forces, and they could put the freed resources into more offensive power. As it is, the Soviets had to (and still have to) concentrate a great deal of payload in their large ICBMs, which pose a threat to our ICBMs.

Third, in public statements we would emphasize the assured destruction mission and the disastrous consequences of nuclear war, in order to drive home the points that nobody wins a nuclear war, and that nuclear weapons are not a substitute for adequate conventional forces.

Fourth, we would attempt to stabilize force levels on both sides by refraining from deploying an antimissile defense of our cities against Soviet attack (which would have been ineffective in any case), and by emphasizing that when we had enough forces for assured destruction, we had enough forces, regardless of the force ratio (which was very much in our favor in those years). In other words, the declining margin of U.S. numerical superiority was not a threat to our security as long as we maintained an assured retaliatory capability.

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NATO TODAY

I have recently written on NATO strategy elsewhere,² so I will make only a few summary points here.

First, NATO has more total military manpower than the Warsaw Pact countries, and about equal land forces in the critical center region. However, NATO isn't getting the military power we are paying for. Lack of integration of defense establishments and other factors have cost us major losses in defense effectiveness. The priority goal of the alliance should be to achieve the maximum conventional military power available from the resources we are spending. One important part of doing this would be to bring home and dismantle about 6,000 of the 7,000 nuclear weapons we have deployed in Europe. This would free about 30,000 men, who could then be reassigned to increased conventional forces. Such a program should enable us to maintain conventional forces equal in power to those of the Warsaw Pact countries, in which case we would not need to depend on the threatened first use of nuclear weapons.

Second, the United States must keep substantial (not token) forces in Europe, to help maintain the balance and to hold the alliance together. To pull out our troops and revert to a "trip-wire" strategy would be dangerous, ineffective, and wrong.

NUCLEAR STRATEGY TODAY

There is still no resolution to the moral dilemma of nuclear targeting. A strategy that emphasizes the ability to destroy enemy strategic forces on their bases seems like a dangerous exercise in futility: dangerous because increasing the enemy's perceived vulnerability of his forces might put pressure on him to launch those forces in a crisis before they are destroyed on the ground; futile because even the ability to destroy all the Soviet silos would leave hundreds of their submarine-launched missiles at sea, able to destroy our society many times over. On the other hand, a strategy that emphasizes the destruction of enemy cities means killing millions of innocent civilians. While I think that the efforts of scholars and strategists such as Fred Iklé and Bruce Russett to find a way out of the dilemma are worthwhile and ought to be continued, I am not at all optimistic that a satisfactory resolution will be found.³ It seems to me that the best approach continues to be based on the twin themes we stressed in the early

1960s. First, we must continue to stress invulnerability as the foundation for the *controlled* and *deliberate* use of our strategic forces, if they should ever have to be used. In some circumstances, countermilitary attacks might have to be executed quickly. But retaliation should not have to be fast. Submarine-launched ballistic missiles continue to be the most appropriate weapon system. Our ICBM silos are gradually becoming vulnerable as accuracies, payloads, and yields improve. And our strategic bomber bases have been extremely vulnerable for years, so that the bombers offer minimal capability for control and deliberation. (The fact that they require defense suppression attacks to be able to assure penetration of enemy airspace makes them even worse.) Second, we should continue seeking to minimize the role of nuclear weapons in our overall strategy. We should threaten enemy cities only in retaliation for deliberate attacks on ours. We should plan to meet all nonnuclear aggression with nonnuclear defenses. These measures should minimize the likelihood of a deliberately started nuclear war.

As for actual targeting plans and capabilities, I think that flexibility, including some capability to attack strategic and other military targets, makes most sense, provided the cost is kept low. I do not accept the view that we should rigorously confine our target destruction capabilities to enemy cities. As Albert Wohlstetter observed, not even Ghengis Khan deliberately avoided attacks on military forces in order to be able to concentrate on destruction of civilian populations.⁴ A moderate counterstrategic military capability will continue to pressure the Soviet Union to put more of its strategic budget into protection and less into offensive capabilities. But, given their large force of submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and the size and protection of their ICBM force, a preemptive disarming attack by the United States is out of the question by a very wide margin, so a moderate U.S. capability to attack silos should not be a significantly destabilizing factor.

However, while I sympathize with his desire to wrestle with the dilemmas, I still believe that Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger's announcement of a new U.S. strategic-targeting doctrine, in January 1974, was both unnecessary and unwise.⁵ It was unnecessary because there had been no real change in policy. I cannot speak for the years since January 1969, but Schlesinger's suggestion that previous strategic-targeting doctrine was limited to massive attacks on cities certainly was not an accurate de-

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scription of the thinking of the leaders or the plans of the Defense Department from 1961 to 1968. One must distinguish criteria for measuring the adequacy of forces from targeting doctrine. As McNamara and others, including myself, stated repeatedly during that period, assured destruction was a criterion for the adequacy of our strategic retaliatory forces, not a statement of targeting doctrine. For example, in June 1968, I told the Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Armed Services:

Our targeting policy, as reflected in the guidance for the preparation of the targeting plan, has not changed. From 1961-62 on, the targeting plan has been based on the principle that we should have different options that target the strategic forces and cities.⁶

The principle of flexible plans and targeting options that avoided cities was established in the early 1960s. If Schlesinger, or his strategic analysts, didn't like the plans he inherited in 1973, he had the authority to change them without involving the Congress or the press.

The statement was also unnecessary because Schlesinger did not need to invoke a new strategic doctrine to justify continued research and development programs for improving U.S. missile accuracy. I believe he could have justified them as pursuit of continued U.S. technological leadership, a goal which we ought to pursue relentlessly, at least in the absence of a reliable agreement to accept mutual limitations.

And the announcement was unwise because, as anyone recalling McNamara's experience after June 1962 might have predicted, it elicited many confused and emotional responses both in Washington and in Moscow. "What is the secretary talking about?" "Why is he saying it now?" In particular, it rekindled the belief, in some quarters, that strategic forces might be substituted for conventional forces. I believe that Schlesinger would agree that no nuclear targeting doctrine can be a substitute for adequate conventional forces, but his statements were open to that interpretation.⁷ And that kind of misinterpretation can further confuse and weaken the resolve of our NATO allies.

Moreover, while I believe that any use of nuclear weapons ought to be controlled and deliberate, I do not believe that the concept of limited, strategic nuclear war offers any meaningful policy alternative for the United States. The United States does not have an effective national fallout-shelter program. So a Soviet attack that,

for example, detonated thousands of megatons on our ICBM sites would inevitably kill tens of millions of Americans, even if the Soviets tried to avoid attacks on cities. Additionally, if the Soviets were attacking strategic targets in the United States, they would have to consider our bomber and submarine bases to be the most attractive targets—and many of them are in or near populated areas. The pressures for escalation would be enormous. Because of these factors and the inevitable confusion, hysteria, communications breakdowns, and the like, I doubt that nuclear war could be controlled and restrained for long, if at all. Trying to control it is a last desperate hope to limit the catastrophe—no more. So we must not let attempts to limit the damage in a nuclear war confuse the message that nuclear war would be extremely dangerous and destructive. Whatever the difficulties of maintaining adequate conventional forces in Europe might be, nuclear forces do not offer a viable alternative.

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NOTES

1. William W. Kaufmann, *The McNamara Strategy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 116.
2. "U.S. Forces in Europe: How Many, Doing What?" *Foreign Affairs* 53 (April 1975).
3. Fred C. Iklé, "Can Nuclear Deterrence Last Out the Century?" *Foreign Affairs* 51 (January 1973): 267-85; Bruce Russett, "Assured Destruction of What? A Countercombatant Alternative to Nuclear MADness," *Public Policy*, Spring 1974, pp. 121-38, also reprinted in this volume.
4. Alain C. Enthoven, "Reason, Morality and Defense Policy," *America* 108, (April 6, 1963): 465.
5. James R. Schlesinger, in remarks to the Overseas Writers Association Luncheon, International Club, Washington, D.C., January 10, 1974. For example, "We must be in a position in which the President of the United States, if he's called on to use strategic forces, has an option other than the option that I have referred to which concentrates on cities and which therefore carries in its wake the notion of inevitable destruction of American cities." The theme was reiterated in a news conference at the Pentagon, January 24, 1974.
6. U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Armed Services, Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, *Status of U.S. Strategic Power*, 90th Cong., 2d sess., April 26, 1968, part 1, p. 138.
7. For example, Ray Cromley's nationally syndicated column, as it appeared in the *Palo Alto Times*, February 25, 1974, said: "For one, the 'retargeting' is not primarily involved with a Russian first strike on the United States, which Schlesinger discounts heavily. It is rather that Schlesinger tends to regard nuclear missiles more as conventional weapons to be used when necessary in foreign local wars when Soviet victories would strongly threaten U.S. security. . . . This strategy is Schlesinger's alternative to developing the dreadfully expensive conventional forces and weapons required to deal with an all-out Russian drive into Western Europe. . . . Nuclear weapons therefore will substitute for a shortage of Western conventional forces in the crunch."

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